

Computer Genius

By Bill Husted

bhusted@ajc.com

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- Congratulations. I'm here to deliver your Instant Computer Genius Kit. Use it to impress your friends or get your computer or online connection going again.

Most of what's in the kit is simple enough for even a grown-up. You can use these tips to impress and amaze your spouse or friends, although I suggest keeping the techniques private. As any magician knows, you should never let the audience in on the secret.

We'll start with the easiest trick: fixing a frozen or balky computer. Simply turning off a computer, counting to five and then turning it back on will fix the problem at least half the time. A lot of computer troubles are one-time hiccups. Restarting the computer often clears the problem. And, unlike elaborate "fixing," you'll do no harm even in cases when restarting fails to correct the problem.

Have you ever turned on your computer and found that it has lost its high-speed connection? You could call your service provider, buy a new modem or router, or trudge through complex diagnostic procedures. But you might restore the connection just with the on/off routine.

Simply turn off both the high-speed modem and your router. Then turn them both back on. You'll most often find that your connection is working again.

What's the magic here? Your high-speed modem establishes communication with the modem on the other end through a synchronization process. A blip in power or other temporary glitch can throw the two modems out of sync. When you restart the modem, it automatically establishes this synchronization.

The next fix takes care of a really common problem. Over time, computers can take longer and longer to start up. In extreme cases, you have time to fix a cup of coffee while waiting for everything to load.

The most common cause of the problem is spyware or adware. Check for that with Ad-Aware or Microsoft Defender — both free for the downloading — or with your choice of anti-spyware programs.

The problem often is that your computer is automatically starting dozens of programs — including some that you don't want or need — each time you turn it on. When you install a new program, it often automatically sets itself to load all or part of that program each time you start the computer.

The fix is simple. Click on the Start button and then find the Run command. Type: msconfig. That will open a small program. Select the tab that says Startup. You probably will see a long list of programs with check marks by each program name. If you see strange program names and you can't identify them, type the name into Google. You'll almost always find the name.

Leave the checkmarks by your anti-virus program and programs that are part of Windows itself and, of course, any programs you want to start automatically. Then restart the computer.

It should move along smartly now. If you want to add some programs back to the automatic start-up list, simply repeat this procedure and add checkmarks where needed.

There are times when these simple techniques won't fix a balky computer. There's one last-ditch tip — not as simple as the rest and very drastic — that can fix a computer even when you don't know the problem.

I think of it as the high-tech equivalent of dropping a nuclear bomb.

First, back up any data you've created, including e-mail, word processing documents, spreadsheets, the works. Don't bother backing up your programs.

After you make the backup copies — usually it's easiest to use an external hard disk for this, although CDs and DVDs can work, too — check them to make sure that they actually exist.

Then reformat the computer's hard drive and reinstall Windows, then your programs and finally the data you saved. There's no way in the world that I can cover all the gotchas in this process. I suggest one of the many computer help books or a site like EHow (www.ehow.com) — do a search for reformat — before you even think of trying this. If you end up being unsure of your skills after doing some research, please don't go through the process. Mistakes can cause you to lose all your data or even create a computer that isn't usable.

Despite the potential dangers, no Computer Genius Kit would be complete without this trick. The beauty of it is that you don't need to identify a problem to fix it. You literally start from scratch. So this method will fix almost any problem other than one caused by defective hardware.

One final simple tip for fixing balky computers. When all else fails, swallow your pride, put the machine in your backseat and take it to an RE (real expert).

— *Bill Husted writes for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. E-mail: bhusted@ajc.com.*